

Expo offers guidance, support for female ex-offenders

BY BRIAN SLODYSKO Staff Reporter May 8, 2014

When Stepanie Cooper was released last June after a year in state prison, she was euphoric over her new freedom.

Pretty quickly, though, the realities of the outside world came rushing back.

“You’re not paying bills in prison. There’s no light bill, no gas bill — none of that stuff,” said Cooper, who said her 2012 conviction was rooted in drug addiction. “So when reality sets in, when you get back in the free world, if you don’t have your mind set on changing, you’re not going to change.”

On Thursday, Cooper, along with about 600 other women who have served time, attended the Summit of Hope at Kennedy King College in Englewood.

The goal of the expo, a women-only event in honor of Mother’s Day, was connecting recently released prisoners with services and community groups that can ease their transition.

Finding a job, feeding a family and paying rent can be even harder for ex-cons, corrections officials said. And those who don’t succeed on the outside could be tempted to commit more crimes.

About 28 percent of women return to prison after their release, according to the Illinois Department of Corrections, which co-hosted the event with Illinois Department of Public Health. Roughly 47 percent of men wind up behind bars again.

“Once the door slams in their face, they go back to the old ways — in the streets, selling drugs, panhandling and prostitution,” Cooper said. It’s a fate she wants to avoid.

Having a good support group is key, said Dawn Layne-Kindred of the Men And Women in Prison Ministries, which had a booth set up at the event.

Not being afraid to use available resources also is important for newly freed prisoners, she said. But ultimately self-improvement is “an inside job,” added Layne-Kindred, who did two stints in state prison for forgery, one in the late ’90s, the other in the early 2000s.

“Life can change after corrections,” she said. “I mentor people to show they can have a better life if they want to.”

Faith-based groups, state agencies, and healthcare providers all had booths at the event. But the expo also gave ex-cons a chance to network and maybe land a job, which organizers said is vital to avoid a return to prison.

That’s precisely what Cooper — whose rap sheet includes narcotics and theft charges — hoped for.

Since her release, she’s done temp work, with frustrating and inconsistent hours. Cooper, 30, said she really wants a regular job.

“A lot of us that want to change, that want a job, that want to be that productive person in society — we can’t,” Cooper said. “Employers are looking at us like ... she’s a criminal, we won’t hire her.”

Then she pitched herself: “I’m a good person. I made some bad choices and mistakes. Give me a chance.”

Valerie Coral, 53, was also at the expo to find work. Coral, who court records show was convicted of murder in 1993, said she got a GED and went through numerous job-training programs during her 19 years behind bars.

“I was young and made mistakes,” she said, of her murder charge. “But while I was in prison I rehabilitated myself and educated myself.”

Upon release in 2010, she said she landed a job at a shelter for battered women and children. Then the funding ran out, which sent her back to square one.

She scanned the booths optimistically.

“Ten doors may be closed,” Coral said, “but one door will open.”